

# LEADING *in* READING

NEBRASKA DISTRICT NETS SUCCESS WITH EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING

By Melanie Mueller and Ron Hanson

With the accountability age in full swing, the Papillion-La Vista School District in Papillion, Nebraska, has taken a proactive stance to improve learning for all students, focusing directly on the human element as the change agent.

The district has implemented a systemic and systematic continuous improvement process that fosters quality teaching through the work of professional learning teams, and the process has led to improved student achievement.

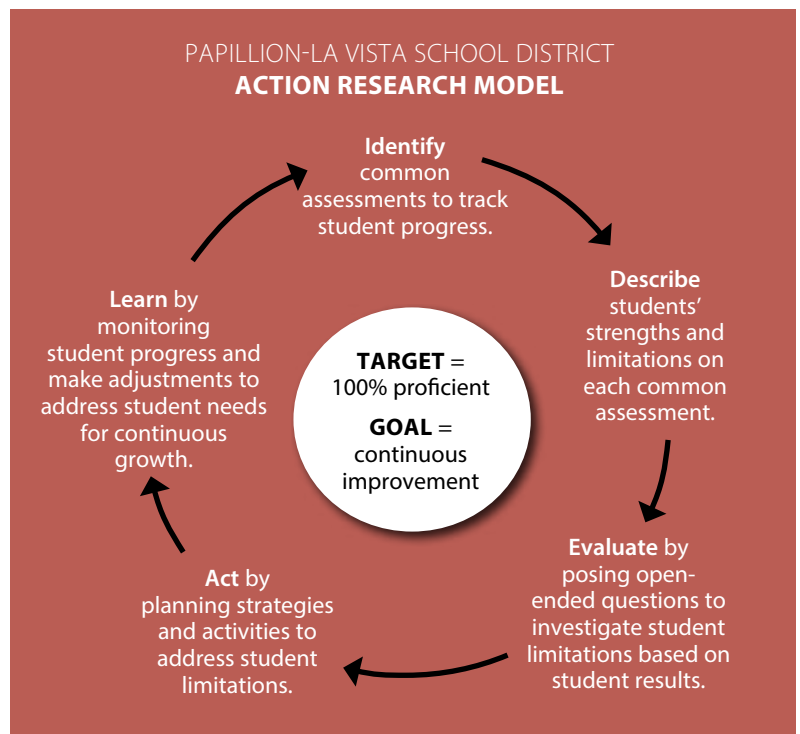
This continuous improvement process is known as IDEAL (see diagram at right), which is derived from the elements of the action research model the districts uses:

- **Identify** common assessment outcomes to be tracked regularly;
- **Describe** students' strengths and challenges across those outcomes;
- **Evaluate** by posing open-ended questions and elaborating on the assessment outcomes;
- **Act** by planning evidence-based adult actions (Hattie, 2009); and
- **Learn** by regularly reflecting within professional learning teams.

In the IDEAL process, professional learning teams use data to inform decision making, challenge one another's thinking, and embrace the conviction that all students can achieve (Blanc, Christman, Liu, Mitchell, Travers, & Bulkley, 2010). Pam Lowndes, principal at Portal Elementary, says, "The IDEAL process has given my staff permission to question practices and change things up without taking things personally."

#### DIGGING DEEPER FOR RESULTS

For more than a decade, the district has researched,



implemented, and continues to refine and enhance the work of its professional learning teams. Initially, professional learning teams used the guiding questions posed by DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004):

1. What do we want students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know to what level students have learned?
3. What do we do when students have not learned?
4. What do we do if students already know it?

However, even with these essential components embedded into the learning team culture, something was missing: the ability to evaluate the most effective adult actions having the greatest impact on student learning.

So, with a renewed commitment for building instructional capacity, the district implemented the IDEAL action research process for use at the classroom, building, and

district level.

The process began in earnest in August 2010. Continuous improvement leadership teams used the train-the-trainer model to showcase the updates and rigor added to the district’s professional learning communities and classroom goal-setting practices.

The IDEAL process enhances the district’s previous methodology by including evaluation and requiring teachers to complete the first three phases before establishing a classroom goal action plan. The addition of the term “action plan” to the goal process emphasizes the shift from simply stating a SMART goal to developing an action plan that requires quantitative and qualitative data related to student outcomes and the subsequent impact of professional learning on achievement outcomes.

This is evident in the learn phase at all levels, including early childhood and English language learner action plans. Professional learning teams meet regularly to discuss adult actions and the impact those actions have on student learning. Each quarter, professional learning teams meet with their supervising administrator to reflect on their progress.

The power of the IDEAL process is its ability to reinforce,

and in some cases even model, what adult actions have the greatest impact on student learning — taking on the form of evidence-based professional learning.

In fact, the IDEAL process has created a culture for leading learning (Fullan, 2014). Lydia Gabriel, principal at Parkview Heights Elementary School, came to Papillion-La Vista with administrative experience from two other metropolitan districts. “Although the IDEAL process is quite complex and the learning curve was huge, I knew I would love the process once I got it figured out,” Gabriel says. “The IDEAL process is designed in a way that provides a structure that I truly appreciate and need as a leader. ... I could never go back to using a process that didn’t provide this much structure and support.”

Robust professional learning teams armed with the IDEAL process have become the driving force for continuous improvement and professional learning. This human element, via shared quality pedagogical content knowledge, has proven to be the most effective and efficient way to use existing resources to impact student learning.

John Schwartz, secondary assistant principal at Papillion-La Vista High School, says, “Professional learning teams requested even more time to devote to the IDEAL process to ... develop other building-specific strategies to improve student learning relative to local and state student achievement outcomes.” This commitment, based on his feedback, has been a focus area and a continued emphasis of department teams at the secondary level over the last three years.

In 2010-11, the district identified elementary reading as one area in need of improvement. Since implementing the IDEAL process, the district has seen double-digit gains in elementary students’ guided reading levels and on the state reading test, along with gains in common local reading comprehension assessments (see tables at left).

In addition, the Papillion-La Vista School District was one of four schools in its educational service unit whose students scored at or above the state average on all state tests in all grades tested for two consecutive years (Nebraska Department of Education, 2013).

#### REINFORCE ASSESSMENT LITERACY

Recognizing that teacher quality is a key element when it comes to improving student outcomes and “a teacher’s effectiveness stays with students for years to come” (Tucker & Stronge, 2005, p. 5), the district knew it needed to reinforce assessment literacy to

LONGITUDINAL ELEMENTARY READING OUTCOMES: **Papillion-La Vista School District**

Goal	Grade	% proficient				% change
		2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	
Increase achievement in reading comprehension and vocabulary as measured by state accountability reading assessments.	3	75%	76%	87%	86%	11%
	4	77%	81%	85%	87%	10%
	5	76%	77%	85%	87%	11%
	6	79%	84%	85%	89%	10%

Goal	Grade	% proficient				% change
		2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	
Increase the percentage of students reading at or above end of grade level guided reading targets as measured by Pinnell & Fountas (2007).	1	81%	89%	90%	93%	12%
	2	75%	89%	91%	89%	14%
	3	66%	84%	87%	91%	25%
	4	64%	83%	86%	89%	25%
	5	57%	81%	83%	87%	30%

Source: Papillion-La Vista School District Student Information Management System.

Goal	Grade	% proficient				% change
		2009-10	2010-11	2011-12 new assessments	2012-13	
Increase achievement in reading comprehension and vocabulary as measured by local common summative assessments.	3	62%	83%	78%	81%	3%
	4	69%	85%	83%	87%	4%
	5	68%	88%	83%	84%	1%
	6	68%	85%	71%	80%	9%

Source: Papillion-La Vista School District Student Information Management System.

support the action research taking place in classrooms and professional learning teams.

To do this, the curriculum department worked with core area content teams to align their district assessments with the state standards. The district uses a curriculum development process based on *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Teacher teams aligned curriculum standards and indicators with assessments to determine if students are learning the intended curriculum.

In addition, curriculum leaders learned about Webb's Depth of Knowledge (Webb, 2002), which provides a vocabulary and a frame of reference when thinking about how students engage with the content. Jan Hoegh, then director of assessment for the Nebraska Department of Education, worked with elementary and secondary leaders on quality assessment development and use, and those leaders shared what they learned within their schools.

Professional learning teams also used this information to construct common formative assessments. The district has since created an assessment literacy module that is required of all new staff. Developing assessment literacy has led to high-quality local common summative assessments and built capacity of all stakeholders using classroom-based assessments to inform teaching and learning.

Technology has been a key to the effective use of data. The curriculum and technology departments teamed up to provide teachers and administrators with real-time data in the form of data dashboards, which increase teachers' capacity for instructional decision making and identifying professional learning needs.

Dashboards have been labeled a "game changer" by continuous improvement teams as well as teachers using the dashboard. Before implementing the data dashboard, professional learning in data use consisted of a one-day retreat in August where teachers reviewed achievement data and set goals.

Implemented in 2010, dashboard technology has expanded to include a real-time, 24/7, general dashboard for daily use by professional learning communities, department, and grade-level teams, a quarterly aggregate dashboard for building and district use that includes subgroups of interest, and an individual student profile dashboard for longitudinal and transitional needs.

## EMPOWERED AND ACCOUNTABLE

The district now sees the ability of all certified staff to efficiently drill down to individual teacher and student outcomes to improve both teaching and learning as a 21st-century skill for continuous improvement. In a timely fashion, teachers are empowered and accountable for addressing student learning needs as well as their own professional learning needs from a variety of angles using data dashboards and the IDEAL action plan process.

Furthermore, professional learning teams in the district

are high-functioning because they focus on the fundamental elements that have the greatest impact on student learning (Schmoker, 2011). The district's focus continues to be on curriculum, instruction, assessment, continuous improvement, productive professional learning teams, and authentic literacy.

Because professional learning teams have a sense of collective responsibility for student learning, teachers are implementing evidence-based instructional strategies with fidelity, and students benefit as a result. Staff and principals collaborate and share effective strategies as a team to improve teaching and learning in every classroom at their respective buildings. As a result, all students have the opportunity to improve continuously.

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